

There is a good case to be made for Cyprus pressing ahead with full recognition of Kosovo's independence

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*Cyprus is one of the five EU member states that refuse to recognise the independence of Kosovo from Serbia. **James Ker-Lindsay** writes that a recent meeting between the Cypriot Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Kosovo suggests that the country's stance may be softening over the issue. He notes that although this may seem surprising given Cyprus's own dispute with the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, it is in keeping with changing attitudes among other EU member states and a shift in Cypriot foreign policy. He also argues that if a change is to be made, there is a good case for pressing ahead with full recognition.*



By all accounts, it was an extraordinary photo. On 24 September, the chief of staff of the Kosovo prime minister Tweeted a [picture](#) of Prime Minister Hashim Thaci and Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj having breakfast with Ioannis Kasoulides, the Foreign Minister of Cyprus, on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York. For a senior official of a country that has spent thirty years trying to prevent the recognition of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), and has taken an extremely vocal stance against Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, it was a quite extraordinary development. However, in the context of wider developments, and recent signals that Cypriot foreign policy is being realigned, it is actually a rather less surprising development than one might believe.

Changing views amongst the EU five

Ever since Kosovo declared independence, in February 2008, it has proven to be one of the most divisive foreign policy issues within the European Union. On the one hand, there are the vast majority of the 28 members that have opted to recognise it. Ranged against them are five members – Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain – that have resolutely refused to acknowledge Kosovo's full independence as a sovereign state. However, this situation now appears to be changing. While Spain remains adamantly opposed to recognition, especially as Catalonia becomes all the more vocal in pressing its claim for independence, there are clear signals that Romania, Slovakia and Greece are reconsidering their positions.

In recent months, Victor Ponta, the prime minister of Romania, has openly [stated](#) that Bucharest should move towards recognising Kosovo. Although this will not happen in the short-term, given that such a move is strongly opposed by the president, Traian Basescu, it now seems to be a matter of time before Romania opts to join the EU majority. Likewise, opinion in Slovakia is shifting. It is well known that Miroslav Lajcak, the Slovak Foreign Minister, is keen to see his country recognise Kosovo and makes little attempt to hide his [meetings](#) with officials from Kosovo. In this case, though, the situation is



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rather more difficult due to a parliamentary resolution against recognition. However, it seems likely that this can and will be reversed; especially if another one or two of the five non-recognisers change their positions. Indeed, the Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee has already signalled his wish to take wider [soundings](#) on the country's position on Kosovo.

Meanwhile, Greece is edging closer and closer to full recognition. In fact, of the five non-recognisers, it already has the strongest relations with Pristina. In March this year, the then Foreign Minister, Dimitris Avramopoulos, invited Foreign Minister Hoxhaj for formal meetings at the foreign ministry in Athens, and in doing so used his official [title](#); a significant development as the post of foreign minister is the one position that is intimately tied up with statehood.

In private, Greek diplomats go even further and admit that Athens is poised to recognise Kosovo. As they explain, the only thing that is holding Greece back is not the country's traditional friendship with Serbia, which has been strained over Belgrade's support for Macedonia on the name issue, but concerns about how this would be read by the Cypriots. But even this is perhaps less a concern now; not least of all because Cypriot officials have said that they understand the position Greece finds itself in with its European partners and why it might wish to earn some goodwill by recognising Kosovo. It therefore appears increasingly likely that Athens will change its policy, despite continuing [denials](#) that it will do so.

New direction in Cypriot foreign policy

The fact that Cyprus sympathised with the Greek position did not in itself mean that it was willing to alter its strong opposition to Kosovo's independence. Indeed, up until recently, it was seen as the most hard line member of the five. As President Papadopoulos stated soon after Kosovo declared independence, 'Cyprus will not recognise Kosovo even if Serbia does.' However, the fact that positions are changing in Slovakia and Romania, as well as Greece, increasingly threaten to put Cyprus in a rather difficult position of being left in a minority of two over Kosovo. It is no secret that Nicosia is desperately trying to shake off its reputation as the 'single issue member state'. Although the continuing division of the island remains the 'National Issue', Cypriot officials are keen to stress that Cyprus is now [more](#) than its 'problem'. For example, it was very noticeable that the Cyprus issue was kept firmly off the agenda during the Cypriot presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2012.

Meanwhile, the election of a new centre-right government, in February this year, has seen a major shift in the country's general foreign policy orientation. Long a stalwart of the non-aligned movement, and traditionally close to Russia, under President Anastasiades and Foreign Minister Kasoulides, who was an MEP before returning to Cyprus to take up the foreign affairs portfolio (which he actually held before), steps have been taken to align Cyprus firmly with the West. Perhaps the most noticeable sign of this has been talk of [membership](#) of NATO's Partnership for Peace, leading eventually to full membership; a policy that would have been unthinkable even five years ago.

The problem of engagement

For all these reasons, any decision to ease the previous policy over Kosovo, if that is really what is happening, would be rather less surprising than may at first appear. More to the point, there are signs that wider public and political opinion may also be easing on the question of Kosovo; not that it was ever a major issue of public concern. Notably, the photo passed all but unnoticed in the Cyprus press. Nor have any of the other political parties sought to raise the issue. (It also perhaps helps that DIKO, the party that is generally regarded as being the most hard line on the Cyprus issue, is a member of the ruling coalition.) To this extent, if the breakfast meeting was a trial balloon for a policy shift, it has certainly not been shot down.

If indeed it was an attempt to test the waters, the general lack of reaction would suggest that there would appear to be room for the government to now take matters further. The big question is what should, or could, come next? A policy of constructive engagement with Kosovo, along the lines of Greece and Slovakia, is an obvious route that would clearly signal that Cyprus is now willing to be constructive on the issue of Kosovo. However, matters are not quite as straightforward for Cyprus as for the others. Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that if Cyprus

does want to take this matter forward it should in fact go a lot further. As odd as it may sound, Cyprus would in fact be better off pressing ahead with full recognition, rather than simply increasing engagement.

The reasoning behind this is relatively simple. One of the key concerns Nicosia has had over the years is not the recognition of the TRNC, but its gradual legitimisation; a process of 'Taiwanisation' where countries increasingly interact with the Turkish Cypriots but stop short of full recognition. Speaking with Cypriot diplomats, this is raised time and time again as their key worry. Such fears have been fed by various efforts to end the isolation of the Turkish Cypriots after their decision, in 2004, to vote in favour of a UN sponsored reunification plan (the Annan Plan), which was overwhelmingly rejected by the Greek Cypriot community.

Moreover, in recent years, there have been growing calls from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) for steps to be taken by Muslim states to '[strengthen solidarity](#)' with the 'Turkish Cypriot State'. By engaging with Kosovo, the Cypriot Government runs the risk of signalling to other countries around the world that this form of engagement without recognition is in fact acceptable. Indeed, it rather leaves it open to accusations of hypocrisy if it now tries to condemn others for interacting with the Turkish Cypriots in the same way as it would be engaging with Kosovo.

The seemingly impossible: recognition?

Faced with this, it may well be easier to stick to the previous policy, with all the growing isolation that this would entail. Alternatively, the Cypriot government could opt to take a very different route altogether and go as far as to recognise Kosovo. While this idea may seem drastically far-fetched at first, the reality is that such a decision may not be as problematic or as difficult as one may imagine. Although Cyprus has long opposed recognition, importantly it has never in fact rejected the 'unique case' argument upon which the United States and most of the European Union have based their decisions to recognise Kosovo; if only to emphasise that Kosovo cannot be a precedent for Cyprus.

Likewise, its position under international law remains strong. Unlike the Kosovo UDI, the Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence was formally condemned by the United Nations Security Council (Resolution 541), which has called on countries not to recognise the TRNC. Similarly, even the International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory [opinion](#) on Kosovo, in July 2010, reaffirmed that the Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence was contrary to international law. Finally, as more than half the members of the UN now recognise Kosovo, Cyprus can equally argue that the tide is clearly flowing in a clear and irreversible direction. By recognising Kosovo, Cyprus – like other countries that face a secessionist threat, but have chosen to recognise Kosovo, such as [Canada](#) – would in fact be sending a very clear message that it sees no link between the Kosovo situation and its own.

Perhaps most importantly, if Cyprus were to decide to recognise Kosovo, it is unlikely that it would face much international condemnation or opprobrium, at least not where it counts. As noted, more than half the members of the UN have already done so. They are not going to say anything untoward. Of the remaining half, many are likely to be mulling a change of heart themselves. Meanwhile, for Cyprus's western partners, who have long pushed for wider international acceptance of Kosovo, it would definitely be a case of better late than never.

Certainly, they are not going to embarrass Cyprus over its volte-face. Indeed, one would expect quite the opposite. Not only would they be keen to reaffirm yet again that the two situations are completely different, Cyprus could well be rewarded for its change of heart. (Especially as this would almost certainly start a chain reaction with Greek, Romanian and then Slovak recognition; or could be organised in tandem with one or all of them.) With new UN-sponsored Cyprus reunification talks on the horizon, a decision to recognise Kosovo could well bring some important payback at a crucial time.

Next steps

Of course, it is important to stress that there is nothing concrete at this stage. One breakfast does not make a policy

change. However, the mere decision of the Cypriot foreign minister to sit down in a public space with the prime minister and foreign minister of Kosovo is a hugely significant development given the previous hard line adopted by Nicosia. In view of the changing positions of other EU non-recognisers, and the clear intention of the Cypriot government to take a new foreign policy course, it could well signal that something is afoot. If so, and as counterintuitive as it may seem, there is a very good argument to be made that the next step of engagement should really be the giant leap of recognition.

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